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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002318

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS-BEIRUT DECLARATION CALLS FOR
RECONCILIATION; SARG STRIKES BACK WITH SERIES OF ARRESTS

REF: DAMASCUS 02263

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: Several hundred prominent Syrian and Lebanese citizens have signed the Damascus-Beirut Declaration, which includes a ten-point "joint future national vision" for reconciliation between the two countries. The document covers the spectrum of Syrian-Lebanese diplomatic, historic, and economic issues, with a pointed call for bilateral unity against US "attempts for hegemony" and Israeli "aggressions." The Declaration's Syrian signatories include many prominent dissidents, intellectuals, activists, and artists from both within and outside Syria, including opposition politicians Riad al-Turk and Riad Seif, activists Michel Kilo and Suheir Atassi, as well as exiled Muslim Brotherhood chief Ali Sadreddin Bayanouni. The document's public release on May 11 has already provoked SARG wrath, as State Security agents arrested Kilo, one of the document's chief architects, on May 14; another eight signatories were arrested between May 16 and May 17. The Austrian DCM, in her capacity as EU Presidency coordinator, has asked that the USG hold off on any public statement until EU members have met on May 18 to discuss the possibility of their own public statement, in order to coordinate the timing of each. The arrests demonstrate the SARG's anger at the opposition's stumble across an apparent redline of civil society involvement in Syrian-Lebanese relations at a critical moment, the eve of UNSC discussion of a resolution urging full implementation of Resolution 1559. The full Declaration text is being sent septel. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) DAMASCUS-BEIRUT DECLARATION PROPOSES INCREASED COOPERATION, RECONCILIATION: The Damascus-Beirut Declaration, a petition signed by 274 Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals, artists, and dissidents, was released to the public on May 11, according to press reports. The document's proposals cover a range of issues, including the need for resumption of diplomatic relations to "enhance their joint confrontation to the Israeli aggression and the American attempts of hegemony," the restoration of the Golan Heights to Syria and of Shebaa Farms and Kafar Shouba to Lebanon, the need to review historic tensions and work for reconciliation, the establishment of democracy in both countries, the increase in economic transparency and cooperation, and the denouncement of political assassinations and sanctions against the Syrian people. The document also describes the need to improve conditions for the two countries, labor forces, calls for the immediate release of Lebanese prisoners

from Syrian jails, and requests a review of bilateral treaties and agreements.

13. (C) SIGNATORIES REPRESENT CROSS-SECTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY:

The 134 Syrian signatories represent a broad cross-section of Syria's internal and external civil society. Signatories from the political opposition include senior political activist Riad al-Turk, Riad Seif and the other four released Damascus Spring detainees, and Socialist Union chief Hassan Abdulazeem. Dissident intellectual signatories include Michel Kilo, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Suheir al-Atassi, Akram al-Bunni, as well as the Paris-based Borhan Ghalyoun and Sadeq Jalal al-Azem (currently teaching at Princeton.) Other domestic signatories include human rights activists Anwar al-Bunni, Daad Mousa, Ammar al-Qurabi, Rezan Zeituneh, the currently imprisoned Ali al-Abdullah, as well as the wife and daughter of jailed activist Kamal Labwani. The most important external signatory is exiled Muslim Brotherhood chief Ali Sadreddin Bayanouni (COMMENT: His signature likely crossed a second red line for the SARG). Other external signatories of note include London-based Obeida Nahas and Haithem Mana'a.

14. (C) KILO FACES VARIETY OF CHARGES: The SARG reacted swiftly against the Damascus-Beirut Declaration, hauling in one of the Declaration's rumored architects, intellectual and opposition activist Michel Kilo, for State Security questioning at noon on May 14, according to human rights organization and press reports. Kilo was interrogated by an investigative criminal court judge on the morning of May 17, and will be prosecuted under five charges of the Criminal Code, including weakening the national morale, awakening sectarian rows, and publishing false news that may affect the state's dignity.

15. (C) AT LEAST EIGHT OTHER SIGNATORIES ARRESTED: Human rights organizations have also reported that at least eight

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other signatories have been arrested, with reports of new arrests coming hourly. The latest arrestees include human rights lawyer Mahmoud Mur'i (a member of Arab Human Rights Organization, a pan-Arabist-oriented group closely linked to Hassan Abdulazeem), writer and human rights activist Nidal Darwish (a member of the Committee for the Defense of Liberty and Human Rights), Deir az-Zor writer Khalid Khalifeh, Kurdish activist Khalil Hussein, activist Suleiman al-Shummar, Ghaleb Amar, and Homs-based political activists Safwan Tayfour and Mahmoud Issa (members of Fateh Jammous's Communist Action Party). Two other activists, Mazen Aadi and Kamal Sheikho, are reportedly being sought by SARG authorities but have so far evaded arrest.

16. (C) EU PRESIDENCY ASKS USG TO HOLD OFF PUBLIC STATEMENTS AS IT CONSIDERS ITS OWN STATEMENT: The Austrian DCM, in her capacity as EU Presidency coordinator, has asked that the USG delay any public statements on the human rights situation in Syria until local EU members meet on May 18 to discuss possible public action. The Austrian official noted that any public statement by the USG without "close coordination" with the EU may leave the Europeans unable to make a subsequent statement. The Austrian official also noted that she could not predict how quickly the Europeans would be able to publish such a statement and that there is still reticence among EU members to confront the SARG publicly. According to human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, the same Austrian diplomat had told him earlier that interest in the Syrian human rights situation is at an all-time high in Brussels. Bunni also noted that it would be best if the EU makes the first statement, then the USG, but also expressed concern that the Europeans might wait too long.

17. (C) COMMENT: While a variety of Syrian opposition activists have informally discussed the need for

Syrian-Lebanese reconciliation, the Declaration is the first concrete attempt by Syrian civil society to make its mark on Syrian-Lebanese relations. The declaration's release date, coinciding with the UNSC's discussion of a resolution urging full implementation of Resolution 1559, was well-timed for maximum political effect. Meanwhile, the diverse profiles and ideological backgrounds of those arrested so far indicate that the SARG is using the Declaration as a means to move against all political opposition, regardless of their position on relations with the U.S. As for the EU's request, while an EU statement followed by a USG statement may indeed be most effective, the EU's tendency to foot drag on Syrian domestic issues means we cannot and should not wait too long to react to this snowballing crackdown.

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